

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

THE VISIT



CHIMAMANDA
NGOZI ADICHIE

VISIT...

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BLACK STARS

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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The American president was wearing too much makeup: her chocolate face powdered a shade too light, mascara clumped on her lashes, the smudge of berry lipstick like a small wound on her lower lip. She looked hastily prepared—her weave lank and in need of tonging—and she blinked at the cameras as she spoke. Before, this press conference would have been background television noise for Obinna, and if he did listen at all, it would've been desultory and perfunctory. Now, he watched closely, volume turned on high. He had always found it silly how many of his friends here in Lagos proudly ignored Nigerian news stations and watched only CNN, knowing more about the American Congress than they did about the Nigerian Senate, but he, for once, was behaving like them. He began obsessively watching American news about a month ago, after his old friend Eze called to say he was coming back to visit. The Male Masturbatory Act was all they seemed to talk about on the news, the forty-year-old law being challenged, with quick-talking pundits speculating about what the Supreme Court's decision would be. And today it had been announced: male masturbation would remain illegal, punishable by up to fifteen years in prison.

The American president's face was in close-up as she said, "I applaud the court for this just and moral decision. We must never lose sight of what this is about—a waste of a potential child."

She sounded too dramatic, but better that than the Nigerian president, she with her ill-fitting wigs and gaudy jewelry, who always read haltingly from speeches in a flat monotone as though she were seeing the sentences for the first time on camera. In the background on the TV screen were groups of men, Black and white and Asian and Hispanic, in suits, in hoodies, in T-shirts, holding placards. *Respect the bodily autonomy of men. Government hands off my seed. Our Body Our Choice.* Obinna didn't understand why Americans always made a fuss over things that should be left unsaid. Male masturbation was technically illegal in Nigeria, too, but men did it all the time. Men had needs after all, he had done it many times himself, but everyone kept it quiet. The American who had challenged the law claimed he wanted to live in his truth and stop hiding the fact that he masturbated; it was his body, and he should be able to do whatever he wanted with it. *Live in his truth* sounded silly to Obinna, and why did Americans always have to make

everything public? Still, he wanted to have a more sophisticated opinion about the decision, something that would impress Eze. He wondered if Eze still tinkered with old engines, old clocks, anything that had once worked and no longer did. Remembering how much Eze loved machines, and especially how he loved fixing and bringing them back to life, brought Obinna a poignant feeling of nostalgia, for a life that used to be.

They had kept in touch only haphazardly in the eleven years Eze had been away, but there were still things that made Obinna long for their time in university together, made him think, *Only Eze will understand*. Best friends in secondary school, they had become even closer in university, and people called them twins, not because they looked alike but because they were always together: Eze, the tall, handsome ball of fire, burning things in his path, and Obinna, inward, focused, always walking on the edges.

It was Eze who first made Obinna think he could actually be a poet. In secondary school, Obinna wrote poems in the back pages of his notebook and sometimes tore out the sheets and crumpled them. Once, Eze picked up a crumpled sheet, smoothed it out, and read it. “You wrote this?” he asked, and his expression was one Obinna would never forget—an admiring awe, an awed admiration.

“It’s nothing,” Obinna said, trying to sound dismissive.

“Guy! This is very good!” Eze said. He always spoke as though each sentence ended in an exclamation mark. Eze, who knew so much about everything, who could talk with adults about politics and history, was saying his poem was good. He began to leave pages of poetry on the table in Eze’s room when he visited, and Eze would return them later, sometimes with comments written carefully on the sidelines. *This sounds forced. Wow. Beautiful.* It was Eze who made him submit his poem to the campus literary magazine in their first year of university, and Eze who bought beers for their friends to celebrate the poem’s publication.

Eze, bold, interesting Eze. Even his family was bold and interesting. His mother was a doctor working somewhere in the Middle East and came home once every few months, a short, round woman who seemed mismatched next to her tall, slender husband. Eze’s father normally spoke like Eze, in bursts of words, full of proclamations, but whenever Eze’s mother was home, his exuberance was quelled. He became almost meek, asking Eze to please not play loud music so as not to disturb her, making different juice mixes and

health concoctions with ginger and lemon and carrying tall glasses to her in her study. His mother emerged once in a while and would go out to the garden with a net to catch butterflies. She'd dry them and place them in a display case, which was strange but also exciting to Obinna. Obinna's family was ordinary, his mother a headmistress, his father a barber, both of them unremarkable and dutiful. It thrilled him to be close to a family whose shelves were full of dead butterflies. He spent so much time at their house that their houseboy began to set a place for him at lunch and dinner, when Eze and his parents ate together, the father solicitous, asking if everyone was fine, if the food was okay, and the mother chewing slowly, reading a newspaper or a magazine and saying very little.

Once, after lunch, Obinna was out in the backyard with Eze, Eze on his knees fixing his bicycle tire, while Obinna ate a fresh cashew he had just plucked from the tree in their garden. The juices from the fruit ran stickily between his fingers, and he licked at them.

"Don't be so uncivilized, Obinna!" It was Eze's father. Obinna didn't know when he had appeared at the back door to stand watching them. "Don't lick your fingers like a bush boy. How will you find a wife with this kind of behavior?"

Obinna, taken aback, said, "Sorry, Uncle." He didn't know what else to say. He was used to Eze's father's harangues about finding a wife, but they were always directed at Eze and never at him, until now.

"Daddy, leave Obinna alone. Wife wife wife all the time. We're in secondary school for goodness' sake. You would think we were in our thirties and still single."

"Thirties? You must be joking. A man still without a wife at the age of twenty-eight is like that deflated piece of rubber—useless," Eze's father said, pointing at the bicycle tube.

"I'm fixing it, it's not useless," Eze replied.

His father laughed. How easily emotions were heightened between Eze and his father, and how quickly they returned to normal.

"You have to learn to talk about emotions, Eze!" his father would blurt out suddenly. "Not machines and politics and gadgets all the time. Otherwise you won't find a good wife. You think women care about all that?"

And then shortly afterward, he and Eze would laugh together about something Eze's dog had done.

When his father went back inside, Eze said, "Do you know my father used to be a theater actor when he was in university in Ibadan? Then he married my mother, and she told him he had to quit acting because married

men who were actors were considered promiscuous. That's why he now spends all his time juicing ginger and oiling his beard and watering the flowers in the garden. He doesn't have a life." Eze paused. "I'm never going to get married."

Obinna stared at Eze. His own father might not talk about it as often as Eze's did, but it was understood, of course, that marriage was the ultimate prize for a man. Everyone knew that. So how could a man just choose not to marry? It felt to him sacrilegious, but in the weeks after, he thought of Eze's words often. Until then, it had not occurred to Obinna that he, too, could choose a life different from what was expected of him: graduate from university, get married, have children. He began to think of another possibility. Of going to America with Eze after university, where he would find a job and spend all his free time writing poems. He already knew what he would call his first collection: Dead Butterflies.

"I'll spend most of my time with my folks in the East, but I hope I can stay in Lagos for a couple days, with you and Amara, if it's okay," Eze had said when he called, and there was a new formality to it all, his asking if it was okay rather than just assuming that it was, the slur of his American accent, that strange expression *a couple days*.

"Of course you can stay with us," Obinna had said, and later that day, he cut his hair and shaped his beard at the salon, renewed his gym membership, bought some new shirts, and changed his cologne to what the thin salesboy at Megaplaza told him was the "latest." He was nervous. He did not entirely understand this nervousness. Maybe it was the normal competitiveness of friends who had not seen each other in a long time that made him determined that Eze not think his life provincial. Or maybe it was simply that America intimidated him. There was a *savoir faire* quality to people who lived in America for which he felt both admiration and resentment; they somehow managed to be familiar with all novelty, as if they were privy to the latest of everything and lacked the ability to be surprised. Things would be different, his nervousness less, if Eze were coming back from England. England was familiar. Ever since Obinna's wife, Amara, was promoted to managing director years ago, she had taken them to London every summer and was considering buying a flat in Maida Vale. If Eze lived in England, Obinna would not worry that the glass table with gold accents in the living room looked too dated, that Eze would glance at the TV and say something about

the most recent model that was flatter and sleeker.

On the morning of Eze's arrival, Obinna woke up early, too early, panicked that he had forgotten the arrival time of the flight, and got up to go look at the piece of paper he had scribbled it on. Amara stirred in bed. She had come home late last night. Again. She had many more responsibilities now that she was managing director, but he still did not see why she had to personally entertain her new clients from Europe day after day. He opened the bedroom door quietly so as not to wake her. The living room was bathed in the gray of early dawn; the houseboy, Emmanuel, dusting the furniture, said, "Good morning, sah," before Obinna realized that he was there.

"Put on the light. Why are you working in the dark?" Obinna said.

Emmanuel turned the switch on and looked sourly at Obinna before going back to his cleaning. There was something slothful about him, something mean-spirited. He had been with them only a month and already Obinna wished he could fire him, but it was so difficult to find good houseboys these days. The last two had been particularly bad: one confessed, after the children began having nightmares every night, that he was a witch and wanted to eat the children; the other stole half of Obinna's wardrobe but was stopped by the gateman on his way out with a suitcase of crisply ironed shirts.

This one was disturbingly suggestive toward Amara—even if Amara said she didn't notice that everything the boy wore clearly displayed the mound between his legs. He came too close when he greeted Amara, walked too slowly whenever Amara was in the room, as though to give her time to check him out.

"Make sure your madam's breakfast is not late today," Obinna said to Emmanuel, who, again, said nothing and walked away with his lachrymose demeanor and his cleaning rag. Obinna surveyed the living room, trying to see it through Eze's Americanized eyes. He had replaced the curtains—the beige raw silk seemed more cosmopolitan than ornate jacquard. Was the gilt edge on the furniture a little tacky? At least the painting on the wall, a Bruce Onobrakpeya, would impress Eze. Obinna got the children dressed for school and sat at the table while they had breakfast, toast and fried eggs, the boy eating with his prompt good manners, the girl deliberately crumbling her bread and kicking her brother under the table.

"Stop it! Eat your food!" Obinna said to her.

Amara came out, dressed, earlier than usual. Her breakfast was not ready. Obinna hurried to the kitchen, mumbling, “Sorry, sorry” to Amara and then in the kitchen hissing, “Simple boiled yam and stew, why is it hard for you to do it quickly?”

Finally, Emmanuel served the food. A layer of oil floated on the surface of the stew, as Amara liked it.

“Honestly I am tired of this houseboy,” Obinna said.

“You shouldn’t let that boy stress you,” Amara said, genial, offhand, as though Obinna chose the stress. She settled down at the table, tugging at the frilly collar of her purple blouse, her clear skin the gorgeous color of baked clay.

“If I don’t stress, then nothing will get done in this house,” Obinna said.

“We should use one of those new employment agencies and find a real steward.”

“*Mba*. Those agencies that are for oil company people that pay crazy money to get chefs from Togo? No way.”

Amara laughed. “I keep telling you, darling, you don’t seem to realize that we have arrived! *Ife adigo!* We can more than afford it.”

She spoke with the new expansiveness that came after she was made managing director, as though everything was possible, everything could be handled, and as though, too, every appetite should be sated. She urged Obinna to spend more, buy more things for himself, for the house, for the children. *Arrived*. They had indeed arrived, with this new house in Parkview, an intimidating mirror in the hallway, and furniture imported from Italy.

The children had finished eating and Obinna went outside, deposited them in the car, and told the driver, Mary, to come back right after she dropped them off. “Yes, sir,” she said, with a sheepish smile. He suspected that the woman ran her own private errands after dropping off the children, and then came back hours late to say, “Terrible traffic, sir.”

Back inside, he smoothed the collar of Amara’s blouse—it stuck out at a slightly awkward angle, perhaps from the dry-cleaning. “You look very nice.”

Amara was distracted, scanning the news on her iPad. “You know the new oil minister will be announced today. The *Guardian* is saying that it will likely be a man. Mr. Akpan.”

“I hope you’ll be home before Eze arrives,” Obinna said, but Amara didn’t hear him.

“Progress is good, we all want progress, but a man should not be in charge of such a sensitive post, it’s too important,” she said.

“I agree,” Obinna said. “And how will it look when we go to OPEC

meetings and it turns out that only Nigeria has a male minister? They won't take us seriously."

"Yes!" Amara said, and looked at him with a flash of approval. "Especially now that we have an opportunity to place Nigeria in a major position of influence, with all the problems in the Middle East." Amara went back to the screen, eyes narrowed.

Obinna remembered, with a nostalgic pang, when he and Amara used to talk more like this, about the news and the world and their fears, when they mixed their powdered milk in water to make it last and Amara came home early from work and he knew details about the manager Amara hated. Now, Obinna hardly knew anything. With each new promotion, Amara had become more vague. Meetings materialized on weekends. Unnamed responsibilities were gestured to, like fleeting dust motes. All done in Amara's careful, loving way: she apologized earnestly, she came home with cake, shawarma, ice cream, once even a watch, a handsome platinum watch, that made Obinna wonder if Amara had originally bought it for him. He didn't particularly like watches, Amara knew that, and if he was partial to jewelry at all, then it was to cuff links. Obinna had never worn the watch, it was still in its black domed case, in a drawer, at the very back, away from view.

Obinna often read, in men's magazines, that men knew about other men in their wives' lives but chose not to know, as if knowing and not knowing were in fact real choices. He had not wanted to know, for example, about Amara's secretary, but he knew, he just knew, from the new insouciance in that secretary's manner: "You are *welcome* to our office, Mr. Ofoegbu," he had said the last time Obinna dropped by Amara's office, as if Obinna were somehow intruding on his territory, as if the secretary no longer felt he had to be deferential, that bush boy who had hardly passed through a polytechnic and had been hired only because he was from Amara's hometown. The insouciance said: "I want you to know that I know something that you don't know."

Obinna poured himself a glass of orange juice and watched Amara eating and reading with pursed lips. He did not believe that the new clients from Europe had kept Amara out late the past week. He wanted to believe it, but he just could not, and it had nothing to do with "choice." Was it a choice when your spirit awakened to something? If he had made a choice, then it was to do nothing, and ask nothing, of his knowledge.

The first time Amara had an affair, or rather the first affair that Obinna knew of, was with a man who owned a shop in the Palms mall. Obinna sensed something, at first, in Amara's new eagerness, her brightness, but it was not until he saw the bite mark on Amara's neck, like whorls drawn in faded red ink, that he asked. Amara said it was an insect sting. Obinna gave her an ointment for it, and the next day, he asked Amara's driver, Catherine, whose loyalty he had constantly courted with food and money so as to always have information about Amara, where she took madam after work. Catherine told him. He had been stunned, both surprised and unsurprised. He hated now to think of how dramatic he had been, calling Amara's cousin, the one who had paid her school fees after her parents died, and her brother, the one who was closest to her, to ask that they speak to Amara. He must have been hysterical; it was laughable to think of that now. *Talk to your sister o! She wants to destroy this marriage!* But both of them told him to not make a fuss, the important thing was that Amara came home to him every day, and Amara was a very good wife, and he had to consider how difficult it was for Amara in her position, with all those young boys throwing themselves at her.

It was truly believing this, Amara as a wonderful wife besieged by young boys, helpless in the face of their rapacious pursuit, that made Obinna get dressed and ask his driver to take him to the Palms mall, where he walked into the shop and screamed at the man, a mere boy really, no more than twenty, and threatened to hit him, and even raised a hand in the air. Afterward, he felt small. The boy's voice rang in his ears: *Go and put your marriage in order! Leave me alone!* The memory still made Obinna cringe, how easily, cheaply, he had become a Lagos cliché: the husband fighting the boyfriend in public. He had never discussed it with Amara, one of the many things they carefully left unsaid.

Amara glanced at her watch. "I have a meeting in thirty minutes. What time does Eze arrive? I'll try and leave the office early today."

"I feel nervous about seeing him."

"Ten years is not ten days," Amara said as she got up. "But it will be okay. You'll see, it will be just like university days again."

Amara's tone soothed him. It was Amara who drove Obinna and Eze to the airport that humid evening eleven years ago, and she stood aside and watched as he and Eze hugged goodbye and later, in the car, told him in this same soothing tone that it would be okay, that Eze would just be a letter or phone call away.

"I hope so," Obinna said now.

Amara brought out her compact and looked in the mirror. She put on

more mauve lipstick, made smacking sounds with her lips. “What will you do today?”

“I’ll go to the gym. Then supervise that stupid boy so the food we serve Eze will at least be edible.”

Amara came over and kissed his lips and pinched his arm. “It’s good you’ve started going to the gym. This was getting a bit flabby, just a little bit.”

Her tone was light and teasing, as usual, and her kiss, her touch, was still filled with possibility. It was the thought of what they used to be and what they still could be that made Obinna so afraid when he looked at her, made him so paranoid about those young boys with their chiseled arms and bellies flat as hardcover books, who paraded the banks these days, hoping that a big woman would say, “How are you?” to them, because it was so easy for the recipient of a “How are you?” to then become a lover and even, God forbid, a second husband.

“I love you,” Amara said as she left.

Obinna should not have worried. It was true that Eze had changed: he now wore glasses and was bigger than Obinna remembered, a paunch sloping out just above his beltline. But they slipped, with an ease that surprised Obinna, back into the familiar friendship they had shared before.

“What a beautiful house. I did not know people had real hardwood floors in Nigeria,” Eze said when he first walked into the living room. Obinna listened closely for any tone of condescension, any of that American smugness, but he did not hear it.

“You look so well,” Eze said, reaching out to playfully slap Obinna’s shoulder, and Obinna admired the confidence it took for Eze to be so open in his admiration. Eze ate and complimented the food. “To eat fried chicken that is actually fried chicken again. You know Americans smother it in flour and call it ‘fried chicken.’”

They laughed; it was the kind of thing the old Eze would say. Later, as they sat sipping beers and talking in the living room, Eze’s American accent dissolved and he sounded once again as Obinna remembered. Eze talked about his life in America, his long work hours at an insurance company, his relationship with his last girlfriend.

“Three years together and she simply refused to propose. I tried everything. I did everything. But she wouldn’t commit.”

“Was she Nigerian?”

“Yes. I was with an African American before that. Very beautiful nurse. It was the same thing. Not ready for commitment. I later found out she had two other men.” Eze sounded irritated. He turned to the television, as though to find a target for his annoyance. “Can we turn this thing off?”

Obinna, eager to pacify Eze, reached quickly for the remote control. A news presenter was talking about the G-15 summit in Accra, showing footage of the opening dinner, most of the leaders in long formal gowns.

“These leaders’ summits are useless,” Eze said. “All those women talk about is the latest breast enhancement surgery and pedicure and all those girly things. And they’re always plotting to increase pregnancy grants and menopause grants, as if women don’t already have enough biologically based grants.”

Obinna murmured something nonsensical and turned off the TV. Eze got up. “I have to pee again!” he said. When he returned, he sank heavily into the sofa and said, “I actually came back to Nigeria to try an herbal treatment for my enlarged prostate.”

“Herbal treatment?”

“There’s no real treatment for prostate issues. Modern medicine has simply ignored the health problems that affect only men. Did you know that all the major medical research uses women’s bodies as the standards? So the dosage of most medicines we take are based on women’s bodies, which are of course smaller than men’s bodies, so we might actually be undertreating ourselves.”

“Really?” Obinna asked, a bit taken aback both by the turn the conversation had taken and the vehemence in Eze’s voice.

“Yes!”

“So what is this herbal treatment?”

“A relative told me about it. I’m on vacation, so I thought I might as well try it. I have nothing to lose. The prostate issue is not a joke. It takes me half an hour to pee, and it burns like hell, and I’m too young to have this.”

“Sorry, Eze.”

“Thanks, my brother.” Eze opened another can of beer and said, teasingly, “So this is why you don’t work, too much money. And you told me it was because you wanted to take care of the children.”

“It is. Or it was. Now they are in Primary 3 and they are old enough, but Amara won’t let me work.”

“What do you mean ‘won’t let you work’?” Eze asked, eyes narrowed.

“I’ve been out of the job market for so long that the only positions I can

get now would be entry level, and she says it will look terrible for someone of her position if her husband has such a low-level job.”

Obinna sensed Eze’s judgment and so kept talking. “She asks me what is the use of working anyway? I have everything I need. She’s right. She prefers that I do charity work. I started an NGO last year, but when I told her I wanted to scale up, she told me it was better to keep it small. I was helping women in some of the poorest parts of the mainland get their government pregnancy checks. For elite women on the island, it’s easy. The minute you take the pregnancy test to a municipal office or just upload to the website, you get your bank deposit and you get to have an actual ceremony with a government representative present, to personally thank you for keeping the human species going. But for poor women, it’s harder.”

“Well, they still get the money eventually. What do men get?”

Obinna was surprised that Eze would say that. It sounded so elementary, so ignorant. He remembered how proud he was when Amara got her first pregnancy check, how he had laminated the certificate that came with it, the words on top in curly script: *In Gratitude to Amara Ofoegbu, Whose Body Has Done the Work of Keeping the Human Species Alive.*

“But, Eze, it’s not men’s bodies that do the work of keeping the species alive,” Obinna said, almost gently.

“Yes, but we still play a part. No pregnancy without us.”

“Of course, but our bodies don’t do the work.”

Eze snorted. “And yet they have refused to decriminalize male masturbation.”

Obinna sipped his beer. Eze’s views discomfited him. He would not have expected it of Eze, this kind of narrow-minded thinking.

“I don’t support that,” Obinna said carefully, “but it should not even be something anybody talks about. It should be kept quiet.”

“I have a friend who is doing five years in prison. Five years! Because a stupid ex-girlfriend reported him for masturbation and secretly filmed him.”

“That’s bad,” Obinna murmured, although it sounded to him like an apocryphal story, the kind people made up to buttress their prejudices.

He was relieved when Amara walked in, home early, all fresh-faced charm. She hugged Eze, teasing him, mock-scolding him for not keeping in touch, and for a few moments there was an easy camaraderie between all of them that brought to Obinna a rare rush of emotion from the past: contentment, peace, fully exhaled happiness. Then, Amara said she had to leave, to take the European clients to the boat club, but would be back soon.

“You’re going out again?” Obinna asked.

“Darling, I canceled a meeting just to come and welcome Eze. These clients need serious coddling,” Amara said. “And you boys need time to bond anyway.”

In the aftermath of her leaving, Eze was silent for a while.

“Why did you stop writing poetry?” Eze asked.

“I really wasn’t that good.”

“You were.”

Eze was watching him. Obinna felt as if Eze was uncovering something about him, was seeing beneath his mask, to the emptiness he felt from time to time, the fearful desire to try to write again.

“Why did you stop?” Eze asked again.

“I lost interest,” Obinna said, and knew that Eze knew it was a lie. “They’re okay, they’ll never be great,” Obinna added quietly.

“What’s that?” Eze asked.

“What Amara told me, years ago, about my poems. I wanted to apply to a poetry workshop, and she was already a young star at the bank. You know I wanted children from the beginning, and she wasn’t sure she wanted them, and even if she did, certainly not right after marriage, and we agreed I would do a temporary vasectomy, but then she suddenly got pregnant. I was so happy. She was less so, because she had a major promotion exam that year that she couldn’t take because she had to go on maternity leave. She was bitter. She told me not to apply to the poetry workshop. *Your poems are okay, they’ll never be great.* ”

Eze was looking at him with liquid eyes. “And you believed her.”

Obinna shrugged. “Maybe my poetry wasn’t meant to be.”

“I don’t understand,” Eze said.

I don’t understand was also what Eze said when Obinna decided to marry Amara, just months after they met at a party the year after they graduated from university. Obinna and Eze were in a corner, watching the dance floor, and Amara walked up to them, a pretty and self-possessed woman, to ask Obinna to dance. At first, Obinna was surprised, because he had naturally assumed that the gorgeous woman was coming for Eze and not for him, because Amara and Eze seemed a more natural fit. But she came for him, and they danced and laughed, and her breath was smoke-tinged when she leaned in to kiss him. With Amara, he felt emotions he thought only possible in poems. He spoke about marriage a few weeks later, terrified that he might lose her. *I don’t understand*, Eze kept saying. *I don’t understand. You are supposed to live your life before getting tied down by marriage.* And Obinna told him, *You have never really been in love.*

“You said that when I decided to marry Amara,” Obinna said. “You kept saying, *I don’t understand* .”

“You were supposed to become a great poet, not get married a year after graduation.”

“You said you would never marry,” Obinna said.

“I didn’t.” Eze sounded irritated.

“But you want to,” Obinna said, and then wished he hadn’t. “I’m sorry, Eze, that was petty of me.”

Eze shrugged. “My eyes are closing on their own. We better go to sleep.”

Amara came home after midnight, and said she had to go to Abuja in the morning, and would stay overnight, because something had come up at the headquarters that required her presence. Obinna said nothing. He turned over and closed his eyes but could not sleep for hours.

When Obinna told Eze in the morning that Amara had already left for Abuja, Eze said, “She must be very busy.” His tone was tart, and Obinna felt slightly annoyed that Eze was criticizing Amara. They spent the morning talking, watching television, and playing with the children. In the afternoon, Eze said, “Let’s do something tonight. Let’s go to a club.”

“Club?” Obinna said. “But Amara is away until tomorrow.”

“I don’t mean with Amara. I mean both of us.”

“But I can’t just go to a club. I’m a married man.”

“So?”

“I can’t just go to a club as a married man without my wife. It won’t look good.”

“When was the last time you went to a club?”

“In the early years of our marriage, we used to go to this bar that had a live band and a dance floor.”

“So let’s go there.”

Obinna thought of his safe domestic evenings putting the children to bed, watching a film, or reading until he fell asleep with the glow of his iPad’s screen still on. This suggestion, of going out, at night, without Amara, felt like something deliciously forbidden.

“I can’t leave the children alone at night.”

“The children will be asleep, and safe, not just with your houseboy but with those crazy high gates you have outside and that angry-looking guard

there.”

Obinna laughed and then laughed a little bit more. “But my driver doesn’t work late. She’s gone home.”

“We’ll take a taxi. We’ll hire it and have it wait for us.”

“I don’t know any clubs.”

“I’ll find a good one online.”

And so they went. The cigarette smoke, the dim room, the loud music felt at first almost frightening to Obinna, and he stood awkwardly while Eze ordered their drinks. A woman in a glittery jacket sent drinks to their table. Another sent more drinks, her phone number scrawled on a paper napkin. Eze was laughing, telling Obinna how hot he was, how they had to leave early otherwise the women interested in him would start fighting and scratching one another. Soon they were dancing in a crush of bodies, Obinna at first self-conscious at the stiffness of his limbs, but soon he felt himself loosen and lighten, spinning to the music. On their way home, their taxi was stopped at a police checkpoint. Two policewomen and one policeman, all three waving their guns in the air. Obinna handed the taxi driver some money and mumbled, “Give it to them quickly, so that they let us pass.”

But the policewoman who seemed to be the boss shined her flashlight into the car.

“Good evening, madam,” Obinna said very politely; these people could take offense at the slightest thing.

“Where are you coming from?”

“We went out to a club to celebrate our friend’s birthday,” Obinna said.

The policewomen looked them over and then gestured to Eze in his tank top and fitted shorts.

“Is that why you are dressed like a prostitute?”

“What?” Eze said.

Obinna hushed Eze with a nudge. “Please, madam, my wife is waiting for us at home.”

“You are married?” The policewoman reared back slightly.

“Yes, madam.”

“Both of you?”

“Yes, madam, but my friend’s wife is in Abuja. He just came to Lagos for the birthday party today.”

“You don’t look married,” the policewoman said to Eze. “If I had known you were somebody’s husband, I would at least show you some respect, even if you are dressed like a prostitute.”

She waved them past.

“What the hell was that?” Eze said, angry. “What is her damned business? And why the story of the birthday?”

“If we are men who go to a club to celebrate a birthday, it’s more respectable than just being men who go to a club to have fun.”

“What the hell.”

“The police are terrible. They recently sodomized a group of men coming back from a club. Sodomized them with sticks.”

“Oh, God,” Eze said. His club high had dissipated, his face sunken.

“You know,” Eze said, as they got to the gate of Obinna’s home, “that life you invented for me for the policewoman, it might be nice. Me married with a wife in Abuja. Abuja means she’s rich and successful, right? And I take weekend trips to Lagos to party with my boy. It might really be nice.” Eze was smiling wanly, and Obinna suddenly felt sorry for him.

Inside the house, Obinna went straight to the children’s room. He turned on the light and looked at the bunk beds. Both the top and bottom beds were empty. He ran into the room and pulled at the covers to be sure. His chest swelled with panic. He ran to the bathroom, but it was dark and empty. He ran to the guest room and that, too, was empty. He was shouting now, shouting the children’s names. He knew it. That houseboy had kidnapped the children. He knew he should not have gone to a club. He should not have. He ran to the other side of the house, where the houseboy’s room was, and Eze was behind him saying, “They can’t have left the house.”

He opened the door to the houseboy’s room, and there were the children, sprawled out and asleep on the floor, an iPad still flickering in front of them. The houseboy was asleep on a chair, snoring softly. Obinna touched the children and they both stirred but kept sleeping. His relief was so acute he felt a headache coming on.

“Emmanuel!”

Emmanuel rubbed his eyes and got up. “Welcome, sah.”

Obinna wanted to scold him but could not find the words.

“The children came to my room after you left, sah. They said they did not want to be alone, because you were not around.”

“They were sleeping when I left.”

“They were awake. They came to my room immediately after you closed the front door,” Emmanuel said, and Obinna heard an accusation in his voice.

“Take them to their room,” Obinna said. And then he added, “Thank you.”

After the children were settled in their room, Obinna and Eze sat in the living room for a while.

“The children get along with Emmanuel,” Eze said.

“Yes, I guess so.”

“So why wasn’t it your first thought, that maybe they were in his room?”

“I don’t like that boy.”

“I think it’s really that you feel guilty about tonight.”

“What?”

“You went out and did something for yourself today, and you enjoyed yourself, and so you feel that God should punish you for it.”

“That’s not true,” Obinna said.

“It is.”

Obinna didn’t want to argue with Eze. He was tired. There were things disrupted inside him that he wanted to be calm again. He wanted to stop thinking of what could have been, of another life he could have had. He wanted Eze to leave the next day, to go to the East and get his herbal treatment and return to America. And he wanted Amara to come home.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is the author of three novels, *Purple Hibiscus* , *Half of a Yellow Sun* , and *Americanah* ; a story collection, *The Thing Around Your Neck* ; and the essays *We Should All Be Feminists* , *Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* , and most recently, *Notes on Grief* . She divides her time between Nigeria and the United States.